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From: Zolandz, Mark
Sent: Tuesday, April 04, 2017 3:17 PM
To: Branby, Jill; Nelson, Mark
Subject: Article: HRSD project could be a jobs-making machine, McAuliffe says

http://pilotonline.com/business/hrsd-project-could-be-a-jobs-making-machine-mcauliffe-says/article_33f871a7-c30e-5241-a271-b6cfffcb960e.html

HRSD project could be a jobs-making machine, McAuliffe says

- [By Dave Mayfield](#)
[The Virginian-Pilot](#)

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- Mar 31, 2017

SUFFOLK

The Hampton Roads Sanitation District's proposal to pump treated wastewater into the main aquifer beneath coastal Virginia has the potential to be a "game-changer" for economic development in the state, Gov. Terry McAuliffe said Friday.

McAuliffe spoke at the ceremonial groundbreaking for a \$25 million research center associated with HRSD's Sustainable Water Initiative for Tomorrow. The center, at HRSD's Nansemond plant in northern Suffolk, will help with a demonstration at the facility early next year in which 1 million gallons a day is to be injected deep below the surface.

If it works as envisioned, HRSD plans to roll out the SWIFT program to five other plants over the next decade. Eventually, it would mean that 120 million gallons a day of wastewater that's now treated and discharged into rivers would go through a series of extra treatment steps to make it clean enough to drink. Then it would be pumped into the Potomac aquifer. The total project cost is estimated at \$1 billion.

HRSD and its backers have focused a lot on the SWIFT project's potential for reducing pollution of the Chesapeake Bay. They've also pointed to models showing that rehydrating the aquifer should slow subsidence, or sinking of the land – a problem that's added to Hampton Roads' vulnerability to sea level rise.

Less talked about has been the potential for job creation. That's what McAuliffe focused on Friday.

The Potomac aquifer – the main underground freshwater source in the mid-Atlantic – has been under increasing stress in recent decades. Heavy withdrawals, particularly by paper companies and some other industrial users, have caused its layers to compact.

McAuliffe said that when he met early on in his term with David Paylor, director of the Department of Environmental Quality, "I asked him: 'What keeps you up at night?' "

Paylor's reply, McAuliffe said: "Our aquifer. He said, 'I'm terrified what's happening with the aquifer.' "

Virginia environmental regulators have told some big aquifer users to plan on reductions in their permitted withdrawals. And new companies with any interest in significantly tapping underground sources are out of luck.

“We really don’t have that water today,” the governor said.

In has stepped HRSD with models indicating that pressure levels within the aquifer would increase across hundreds of miles if its injection plan is carried out.

That’s in spite of the fact that HRSD’s input of 120 million gallons a day at the SWIFT project’s full operation would be less, still, than what’s coming out of the aquifer – currently, about 150 million gallons a day, according to state officials’ estimates, with about 100 million of that under permits issued to large users.

“We are actually going to be putting drinking water back. It will rehydrate our aquifer, which will allow us to do more economic development,” McAuliffe said.

In an interview after the event, the governor said, “I have a major project I’m looking at right now in this region, and water’s a big part of it.” He didn’t identify the prospect or say whether he has mentioned the SWIFT project to the company.

Also on Friday, HRSD formally signed a pollution credit exchange agreement with the city of Hampton that was prompted by the SWIFT project. Under the agreement, HRSD committed to give the city enough credit to help Hampton meet its obligations for stormwater pollution reductions under the Chesapeake Bay cleanup.

HRSD stands to earn a massive amount of pollution credits if the SWIFT project goes through because it would all but stop discharging treated, but still polluted, water into the bay and its tributaries. Localities across Hampton Roads have lined up behind Hampton to take advantage of HRSD’s offer to give away the credits for nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution. Combined, it’s been estimated, the credits could save them more than \$1 billion in stormwater system upgrades.